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Sound That Stayed with Me

Author's Note:

This is a true story from my childhood.

When I was a boy, I once heard an organ being played in a ruined church. At the time, I knew nothing about classical music and did not even know the name of the composer. Yet that brief encounter remained in my memory for the rest of my life.

Many years later, I realized that the music I had heard was by Johann Sebastian Bach.

This is not a story about music alone. It is a story about memory, about the mysterious moments that shape us without our knowing it, and about the unexpected ways in which art can accompany us throughout our lives.

The Organ

One day it happened completely unexpectedly.

It was an ordinary afternoon. I was walking home from school along a familiar road I had already walked dozens of times before. The road passed an old Catholic church — partly destroyed long ago and, it seemed to me, never fully restored.

And suddenly, as I was passing by, I heard an organ.

An unfamiliar piece of music was flowing out from inside the church. I stopped. My legs suddenly felt weak, my heart began beating faster, and I could not take another step. Yet at the same time my mind felt strangely clear.

I had the odd sensation that I was flying and was about to see something very important — something I had never seen before.

Then the music ended, and I continued walking home.

But after that moment I felt like a different person.

For the first time in my life, I became curious about music. Until then I had never cared much about it. I loved books and reading, but music existed somewhere outside my world.

I wanted to experience that feeling again.

I began going to the conservatory. Tickets were cheap there, sometimes almost free, and I always tried to attend concerts where the organ was being played.

But the organ in the conservatory was small. The music was often performed together with violins or other instruments. I listened carefully, hoping to feel once again the same shock I had experienced outside the church.

But honestly, nothing like that ever happened again.

Gradually I realized that it had not been only the music itself.

Later, I think I began searching for that same feeling in other places — in books, museums, and theater. But at that time books were the easiest thing available to me.

My First Book

I remember the first time I truly began reading.

I was six years old and had just started school. One day we were assigned homework: to read Childhood by Leo Tolstoy. But after school, as usual, I immediately ran outside to play with the neighborhood boys and completely forgot about my homework.

That evening my mother decided to check whether I had done my assignment. She was a very strict woman. She had always been an excellent student herself and approached everything in life seriously and conscientiously.

It turned out that I had not even opened the book.

So, I began reading.

I understood almost nothing. Half the words were unfamiliar to me. I cried from exhaustion and frustration. It seemed to me that the entire book became soaked with my tears.

But my mother firmly said that I would not go to sleep until I had finished it.

Perhaps that was the moment when I first hated Leo Tolstoy and reading books.

My First Beloved Book

Our family moved constantly because my father was in the military. We almost never lived in one place for very long, so we had practically no home library. My parents were not especially interested in reading either.

When I was about ten years old, we lived in a field camp surrounded by military units. There was a small shop there that sold bread, groceries, and a few books.

One day I saw a two-volume historical novel called Yermak.

I cannot explain why, but I desperately wanted that book.

My mother refused to buy it. She believed that with our constant moving, collecting books made no sense.

A few days later my father told me we would go fishing that night and asked me to dig up worms in advance.

Of course I forgot. Late that evening I suddenly remembered. There was very little time left before my father would arrive. I grabbed a friend, and we ran to a place where I knew we could find worms.

Then it began to rain.

Soon there was a thunderstorm.

I remember only darkness, wet ground, and counting the worms I had collected.

And then everything disappeared.

I woke up the next morning.

The room was full of people — my mother, my father, our doctor. Outside the window stood my friends and several adults. I understood nothing.

They explained that I had been struck by lightning and that people had searched for me all night.

And when I finally came fully back to my senses, I saw beside my bed that same two-volume book.

It became the first book in my own personal library.

Big city

A few years later we finally moved to a large city with museums, theaters, and real cultural life.

That was where I first went to the theater.

My mother prepared me for the occasion very carefully. She bought me a new suit, a new shirt, and new shoes. The theater was only one tram stop from our house, and honestly it would have been easy to walk there.

But I wanted to arrive in style, like an adult.

Those were the days of old trams with open doors. As the tram approached the stop, I decided to jump off dramatically while it was still moving.

Naturally, I slipped and fell straight into a huge puddle — it had rained not long before.

My new suit was completely ruined.

I had to return home to change clothes. Of course, my mother scolded me, and by the time I reached the theater I had missed almost the entire first act.

It was a children's performance. I no longer remember what play it was.

But I remember something else.

I sat there in complete amazement.

It felt as if another world had suddenly opened in front of me.

Around the same time, our school began taking us to the Hermitage Museum.

To be honest, I understood very little back then. Painting after painting passed before my eyes, room after room, until everything gradually blended together. Later I learned that people are not really capable of fully absorbing too many works of art at once. Sometimes even ten paintings are enough for the eye to become tired.

That is probably why I do not remember many details from my first visit to a museum.

But I do remember the feeling that somewhere there existed a huge world I had barely known before.

High school

Years passed.

Eventually I moved to a truly large city filled with theaters, libraries, and museums. Life became completely different.

Almost everyone in my class loved reading. Books were discussed constantly — during breaks, after school, outside in the courtyard. There were books that everyone seemed expected to read. If you did not know them, you somehow felt excluded.

That was when I truly became a reader.

For a while I lived almost entirely inside French literature — Alexandre Dumas, adventure novels, historical stories. Later I became fascinated with German literature and especially with Erich Maria Remarque.

But books were difficult to obtain.

Sometimes you had to wait months in a library queue for a good novel. Certain books circulated privately among friends because personal libraries were small. Books like the Bible or the New Testament were almost impossible to find.

Yet it was during those years that I understood something important:

Books are not merely stories.

They open another world — larger and deeper than ordinary daily life.

Over time I found books I could reread endlessly, opening them from the beginning, the middle, or even the end. Some pages I practically knew by heart.

Among the writers I loved most were Lion Feuchtwanger and Erich Maria Remarque, especially Three Comrades.

University

Several years later I entered university.

One evening some friends and I attended a student performance at a neighboring institute. I expected nothing special, but the performance was extraordinary. Most surprising of all, it was an amateur theater group from our own university.

A few days later I tried out for the theater. To my amazement, they accepted me.

Very quickly I discovered that I could do almost nothing properly. I did not know how to speak well. My voice was untrained. I could not sing. My movements were awkward.

So naturally my roles were tiny — something like, “Dinner is served.”

But I loved the atmosphere of the theater.

We had three instructors. One taught speech and voice. Another worked on movement and physical expression. The third wrote original texts for the performances.

Rehearsals were extraordinary. They were not simply rehearsals — they were improvisations, exercises, games, little scenes. Sometimes it felt less like theater and more like a separate life entirely.

And we had to read constantly.

Because the theater was amateur and many productions were original, our performances included figures from mythology, Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet, Apollo, the nine muses.

Sometimes during breathing exercises, while slowly counting on a long exhale — “one, two, three…” — I was asked to recite monologues. That was how I first encountered King Lear.

Even today I remember the line:

“Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks!”

And perhaps it was then that I first understood that art is not only books, music, or paintings.

It is also people trying together to create something greater than ordinary everyday life.

Adult life

After graduation, student life and theater gradually disappeared behind me. Ordinary adult life began — work, family, responsibilities.

Of course, I still read books, visited theaters, and went to museums. But now all of this happened somewhere between business trips, work, and endless obligations.

And then one day something strange happened.

I was traveling for work and sharing a room with several programmers. One evening I returned to find the room empty. On the table lay a stack of typed pages.

I picked them up out of curiosity.

I began reading — and instantly became absorbed.

The text was unlike anything I had ever read before.

The strangest part was that there was no beginning and no ending — only scattered chapters and pages.

For years I wondered what book it had been.

Then one day someone gave me a book to read for just one night — The Master and Margarita by Mikhail Bulgakov.

And suddenly I realized that it was the same book — the same mysterious fragments I had once found in that hotel room years before.

And even now it amazes me that sometimes a book enters a person’s life almost by accident — without a cover, without a title, without an author’s name — as though the book itself had found you.

At some point I began thinking about which books I would recommend to a young person beginning a journey into literature.

Eventually every person creates an inner list of books that remain with them forever.

The next stage of my life — my real encounter with music — also began with a book.

If I had to choose only a few books to begin a lifelong friendship with literature, these would be my choices.

The first book I would name would be Martin Eden by Jack London.

The second would be Fahrenheit 451 by Ray Bradbury.

The third would be And Then There Were None by Agatha Christie.

The fourth would be The Three Musketeers by Alexandre Dumas.

The fifth would be Three Comrades by Erich Maria Remarque.

I would also add The Jewish War by Lion Feuchtwanger.

I discovered Classical Music: The 50 Greatest Composers and Their 1,000 Greatest Works by Phil G. Goulding.

The author himself had a fascinating life. He had been a war correspondent during Korea and Vietnam and later worked for many years as a Pentagon press secretary.

When he retired, his wife gave him a box of classical music tapes. She loved classical music deeply. He began listening — and became so fascinated that he eventually wrote a book for ordinary people who wanted to understand classical music without technical language.

Like a true American, he even ranked the composers.

At the very top stood three “gods”:

Johann Sebastian Bach,

Ludwig van Beethoven,

and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart.

Then came the “demigods,” including Richard Wagner and several others.

For each composer he included a short biography, recommended works, and a list of compositions.

That book became my real introduction not only to music, but also to the history of music itself.

Another discovery surprised me deeply.

Music is completely different from physics or mathematics.

Science constantly changes. Things once considered difficult eventually become simple enough for schoolchildren. Science always moves from the simple to the more complex.

But music is different.

What astonished me was that Johann Sebastian Bach, who lived in the eighteenth century, remains just as profound and difficult today as he was then.

Music does not age the way scientific theories do.

And ever since then, I have continued living alongside those composers, that book, and that music — and now also YouTube, where almost everything can be heard.

But perhaps that is already another story.

Epilogue

Many years later, after listening to Bach's organ works countless times, I suddenly realized that the sound I remembered from childhood was unmistakably his.

Sometimes it seems to me that art exists so that, at least for a brief moment, a person can feel that life consists of more than everyday routine.

Many years have passed, but sometimes I still feel as if I can hear that organ beside the old church.

Perhaps it was there, in that moment, that I first understood how much larger and deeper life really is.

Art did not make my life easier.

But it made it infinitely deeper and more interesting.